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Collectivities without Intention

Until relatively recently, political theory focused almost exclusively on the structure of decision-making and distribution of burdens among individuals in one particular relation: those knowingly sharing membership of a sovereign state. Alongside this, the still-dominant intentionalist tradition in the philosophy of social science defined collectivities (or social groups, which it treated as one and the same) as made up of individual members who considered themselves to be such. This paper will challenge this, defending a rival account of the circumstances under which sets of individuals constitute the kinds of collectivity with which political philosophers and social scientists should be concerned: the former because individuals are actually connected in a way giving rise to a case for collective decision-making; the latter because an identifiable collectivity does something distinct from what its individual members do, survives changes in those members, and plays a necessary part in adequately capturing the significance of some of their individual acts.

I have two reasons for resurrecting this topic. The first is practical: the influence we actually have on each other's lives extends far beyond the units to which we see ourselves as belonging, from families to local schools or universities, from football clubs or political parties to the state. International communication, trade and travel have given rise to economic and legal interdependence. Between us, we have a largely detrimental impact on the natural environment on which we all depend. This has lately been acknowledged in political theory, in cosmopolitanism and the growing field of environmental justice, but it sits at odds with the restrictive intentionalist model of a collectivity still widely accepted in the philosophy of social science. Although I will not explicitly defend a "collectivity of humanity", I hope to identify an expanded model which can serve as a tool for moral and political philosophers in an increasingly global world.

The second reason is theoretical. Intentionalists cannot fully account even for some intuitively central collectivities. These include those often taken to be exemplars, the family or tribe, and that on which political theory has traditionally focused, the state. Intentionalists,

treating collectivities and social groups as the same and defining them via acknowledged shared goals or awareness of group membership, are unable to include certain individuals, such as babies and the severely mentally handicapped, as members. One leading intentionalist, Margaret Gilbert, attempts to do so by appeal to entry rules or imputed membership but this, I will argue, risks absurd consequences.¹ Moreover, these being social concepts in what purports to be a model of the social (of social groups), Gilbert is vulnerable to a charge of circularity.

Instead, I will disentangle the notion of a collectivity from that of a social group – social groups being, I contend, only a subset of the wider set of collectivities – and define the latter objectively, by appeal to actual mutual dependence for the satisfaction of goals, purposes or fundamental interests (Section 1). This model will be defended in three stages. The first (Sections 2-6) is to show that the non-intentionalist can account without circularity for central cases that intentionalists are unable to accommodate. The second (Section 7) is to acknowledge the inclusion of certain controversial collectivities in the non-intentionalist account and defend these as meeting the conditions for collectivityhood borrowed, at the close of my opening paragraph, from the philosophy of social science. Finally Section 8 will defend the model against claims that its own conditions are too strong, or that they are too weak.

1. The Non-Intentionalist Model

This paper will defend the following claim:

A set of individuals constitutes a collectivity if and only if those individuals are mutually dependent for the achievement or satisfaction of some common or shared purpose, goal or fundamental interest, whether or not they acknowledge it themselves.

A broad understanding of “common” is at work here. The mutual dependence clause requires that the individuals have goals, purposes or fundamental interests that it only makes sense to consider as being pursued together. This allows not only for genuinely shared goals, as with a

group of friends setting out to climb Monte Rosa together, but also for individual (selfish) goals, purposes or fundamental interests which can only be achieved together. In such cases, the goal is a common one *because* the individuals are mutually dependent for its achievement, rather than the other way round. Consider for example a situation similar to the start of the television series, *Lost*: a group of strangers washed up on a remote island, none of whom care about each other's welfare but who need to cooperate to survive. Another way of putting this would be that it is collectively rational to act collectively.

This allows for both of the following: goals, purposes or fundamental interests which by their nature can only be pursued together, such as the playing of a symphony by an orchestra, and those which in the circumstances can only be pursued together, for example the keeping clean of a vast mansion. The group includes all and only those who are thus mutually dependent. It would be arbitrary to include some but not all of the friends on their mountaineering expedition or all of the London Symphony Orchestra save one flautist.

There are several distinctions within this account. Collectivities can be pre-existing or new. Compare a village school with a few parents setting up a fundraising committee. They can be lasting or ad hoc: constituted by individuals who are mutually dependent through a very short-term goal, purpose or interest. Paul Sheehy provides an example of the latter: four prisoners escaping in a rowing boat.² Collectivities can be small or large, voluntary or involuntary, passive or active, or can overlap categories. Fathers for Justice is a small, voluntary, active subset of the large, partially involuntary collectivity of divorced fathers unhappy with their legal access entitlements, mutually dependent in the sense that the goal (legal change) is one that, if achieved for any, must be achieved for all. They can be entirely intentional (the fundraising parents) or only partially intentional (the family or state). Most controversially, they might be entirely unintentional, a possibility to which I will return in Section 7.

Some but not all collectivities are social groups: a village cricket side is; Sheehy's escaping prisoners are not.³ Since the aim of this paper is to expand the notion of a *collectivity*, as a unit with which political philosophers and social scientists should concern themselves, I will not examine in detail the notion of the social. Instead, I will work with a rough specification of a

social property, as having significance over and above the material or physical properties with which it coincides, because of the recognition by a certain group of people that it will have it. It is then possible, Section 6 will suggest, to identify social groups as sets of individuals who constitute collectivities only because of some social fact.

Finally, a brief disclaimer: in arguing, like Carol Gould, that collectivities are constituted by “individuals-in-relations”, my model lends itself to her intermediate position, or that defended by Alan Carter, on the spectrum between ontological holism and ontological individualism (although Gould and I disagree on what those relations must be).⁴ However, this paper does not purport explicitly to justify such a stance. Rather, it engages with the vexed ontological question only to the extent that it defends the expressive autonomy of collectivities: the claim that, in referring to collectivities, we are able to state truths we would otherwise be unable to express.⁵

2. The Limits of Intentionalism

The first stage of the defence of the non-intentionalist model is a critique of intentionalism as too restrictive. In referring to “intentionalists”, I take myself as engaging with theorists including but not limited to Gilbert, Christopher Kutz and, at least in some of her work, Gould.⁶ The intentionalist position can be expressed broadly as the claim that a set of individuals constitutes a collectivity only if each considers herself to be part of a group with the others, or only if all jointly intend to do something. Perhaps the narrowest intentionalist view, corresponding to Gilbert’s plural subject model, is the following:⁷

A collectivity is a set or aggregate of individuals with at least one shared purpose or goal, all of whom are aware of that goal or purpose, aware that it is shared, aware of the awareness of other members of this, aware of each member’s joint readiness to commit to achieving the joint goal or purpose as a body, aware of each member’s awareness of

this (and so on).

Call this the Narrow Intentionalist Thesis (NIT). “Purpose” is understood as including commitment to beliefs or values, in the sense of intention to modify one’s behaviour to some extent in accordance with them.

I will reject the intentionalist theses on the grounds that they exclude some individuals intuitively regarded as members of central collectivities, who are not or cannot be aware of a shared purpose or goal, do not or cannot consider themselves as being part of a group, and do not or cannot jointly intend to do anything.

Firstly, however, it is worth clarifying that intentionalists need not adhere to the still more controversial idea (implicit in the NIT) that membership must be voluntary. Given the centrality of those collectivities (families, states) of which we find ourselves a part without choosing to be, this would be highly problematic. Although Gilbert originally defines joint readiness so as to appear to require voluntary participation, Gould, Kutz and Gilbert herself in later work distinguish between that which is intentionally done and that which is voluntarily chosen or even *intended* by the individuals concerned: someone can agree, or express readiness, to do something even under coercion.⁸

Thus, the NIT can be stripped of reliance on voluntariness without threatening the core intentionalist viewpoint. *Awareness*, however, is central: awareness of being part of a group, intending to do something jointly, or intentionally pursuing shared ends. And it is precisely this requirement that is challenged by the following three special cases. The discussion is in terms of the family, but could also be formulated in terms of tribes or even states. In breaking down the NIT in an attempt to accommodate such cases, I will demonstrate not only its inability to include them, but also that of the intentionalist theses more broadly expressed.

The first special case is the baby. Families are central collectivities. Babies, intuitively, are members of families. The rest of the family considers them to be so and treats them as members; they are tied to one another through the ongoing routine of family life, on which they all, including the infant, depend. The infant, although he can hardly be said to have *goals*,

has interests the satisfaction of which depends on that ongoing interaction. Moreover, it is a part of the rest of the family's goal that those interests be satisfied. However, babies are not aware of being part of a collectivity. They cannot participate in any joint intention. They are not aware of all the various things a family does together.

The NIT might be adapted to accommodate infants by requiring that, if they are not currently aware of the goals or purposes and their being shared, members will at least become so. However, this (itself a significant amendment) would not accommodate the next problematic case: the severely mentally handicapped person. One response would be to require that all individuals within the set who can be aware of the goals or purposes (aware that they are shared, etc) will be so aware, but that there may be some who are not so able. But even this, which goes further still from the core idea of the intentionalist account, remains problematic. As with the baby, although he has *interests*, it is doubtful whether the severely mentally handicapped person can have (and so share in) goals or purposes, at all; unlike with the baby, it is sadly unlikely that she will ever be able to form them. Moreover, this change would leave untouched the third problematic case: the teenage rebel.⁹

The rebel is not a baby, nor is he mentally handicapped. He would deny being part of the family and resent any demands made on him by other members. However, his parents think he is part of the family and theirs seems a reasonable conviction given the many ways in which their lives are intertwined. We might helpfully consider two variants of this case. In the first, the teenager espouses the goal of living a comfortable and secure life and continues to reap the advantages of being in the family home whilst refusing to acknowledge his reliance on his family or to consider himself in any way committed to the goal also of furthering *their* comfort and security. In the second, he denies that he has any need for the kind of security provided in his parents' house (food on the table, a welcoming home, educational opportunities, reassurance and conversation, and so on), which he dismisses as bourgeois.

There is interdependence in these cases: the rebel's family members are not mistaken. However, there is no joint commitment to a shared goal. To accommodate the rebel, the NIT would have to be amended yet again, allowing for members of a collectivity who *could* be

aware of the common goal, purpose or interest (aware that it is a common goal, purpose or interest) but deny this. In the first case, the rebel acknowledges a goal or interest but mistakenly denies the mutual dependence that requires that it be pursued as a common goal; in the second case he denies the interest.

In altering the NIT to accommodate these cases, I have stripped it of its intentionalism. To attempt a parallel revision of the broader theses would be immediately to beg the question. It seems completely unhelpful to define a collectivity as “a set of individuals who jointly intend to do something or regard themselves as part of a group *and* some who cannot *and* some who could but do not”. An account would immediately be owed of which of all the many other people in the world are to be included in that “some” and this, I contend, cannot be provided within the intentionalist framework. To avoid being so weak as to be completely open-ended, such an account would have to include some more objective criteria – to appeal, in other words, to exactly the kind of *actual* interdependence highlighted by the non-intentionalist model.

To elaborate on these points, I will consider the attempt of one leading intentionalist, Gilbert, to accommodate at least some complex cases within her intentionalist model. I will reject it on several grounds, including circularity. Sections 4, 5 and 6 will show that the non-intentionalist can include such cases, without circularity.

3. Entry Rules, Imputed Membership and Circularity

Gilbert does not want to exclude the baby from membership of social groups, and offers two strategies to avoid this. The first is via entry rules.

[A] plural subject... may have a sense of need for new members... [T]he existing members may establish rules that determine who may become a member. The possibility of such entry rules allows for complex cases. The rules can in principle be so capacious as to allow those lacking the ability to be members of the initial plural subject to be considered members none

the less. Thus infants can be thought of as ‘members of the tribe’, though they have no conception of the tribe as a whole.¹⁰

Her later suggestion, focusing on political societies, is that infants can be assigned imputed membership as a kind of stop gap until full membership can be achieved.

[Core members] may stipulate that others, for instance, their children, are to be regarded as members for some or all practical purposes. These others then have imputed membership. They will not be core members or members proper unless they come to participate in the joint commitment that constitutes the political society in question.¹¹

Both suggestions face an obvious problem: it is unclear what limits there are on rule-setting or stipulation. As it stands, the first quote suggests that anyone can become a member of a collectivity simply because the individuals who make up its intentional core decree her to be so. Such a view is not unheard-of in actual collectivities: according to the Roman Catholic Church, being baptised, even as an infant, constitutes the formation of an “ontological and permanent bond, which is not lost by reason of any act or fact of defection”¹². However, it would be uncharitable to interpret Gilbert as espousing it, for it has absurd implications.

For example, two of my young cousins are besotted with *Twilight* star Edward Cullen. Suppose they set up a fan club, feel a “sense of need for new members”, and establish entry rules such that all of their first cousins count as members. My sister and I would become members of a collectivity without knowing it or wanting to be. Gilbert’s second strategy, restricting core members’ authority to stipulating imputed or “secondary” membership, would prevent us unwittingly becoming full members.¹³ However, my cousins could still count us as members “for all practical purposes”.

Moreover, this modification comes at a price: even if infants might be generally expected to progress to full membership, severely mentally handicapped individuals could only ever be imputed members of the societies, families or tribes into which they were born. I find this

repugnant: quite apart from the possible practical implications, it suggests that such membership is not something to which they are entitled, but is extended to them (or not) at the discretion of intentional members. However, I will not rest my rejection of Gilbert's argument on this intuition, which is not universally shared.¹⁴ Rather, I focus on the absurd implications of unlimited authority even to assign imputed membership, and the impossibility of curtailing it convincingly without appeal to objective criteria.

To avoid the counterexample above, entry rules or imputed membership might be read as applicable only to those who are cognitively incapable of participating in the relevant joint intention and so could not otherwise become members of the group. However, the position would remain problematic, for three reasons.

Firstly, even if core members must limit their stipulations to those incapable of forming joint intentions *and* even if only imputed membership is assigned, their powers remain absurdly open ended. While my cousins could not include my sister and me in their Cullen fan club, they could stipulate that my baby nephew count as a member "for all practical purposes". In practice, moreover, such assignment of membership can have frightening consequences: consider the fate of Italian Jewish children after the Counter-Reformation, who were secretly or forcibly baptised as Catholics and separated from non-converting parents.¹⁵ What is needed is not unqualified authority for core members, but a way of identifying those others who, in each case, they are *entitled* to consider as belonging to the same collectivity.

Presumably, for Gilbert, the relevant difference between the ludicrous stipulation of membership of the fan club and cases such as parents assigning their baby imputed membership of the family, is that the child can be expected later to commit to the latter collectivity, but not the former. To make this a condition, however, simply pushes back the question. Under what circumstances can the core members reasonably expect this? (Their actually expecting it is not enough: they might be delusional.) Criteria external to the wants and beliefs of core members are needed, whether in terms of biological relationships (which seems too restrictive: consider adoptive families, for example) or actual interdependence.

The second difficulty concerns the teenage rebel, who is excluded from the model by

precisely the restriction used, above, to save Gilbert from some of her most far-fetched implications. If even imputed membership cannot be assigned to those who could commit to the common goals or purposes of a collectivity and who might (based on lives actually interconnected) reasonably be expected to do so, but do not, then the teenage rebel can never even be an imputed member of his own family. If, however, the account of imputed membership (or entry rules) were interpreted as including such cases, more objective criteria would once again be required. What allows the inclusion of the rebel in the family but prevents my young cousins from making me an imputed member of their Cullen fan club?

Thus, we are no closer to understanding how an intentionalist model could accommodate non-intentional members of collectivities without introducing objective membership criteria. A third problem with such “add-on” rules is that they leave the intentionalist vulnerable to accusations of circularity. Gilbert, recall, takes collectivities and social groups to be synonymous. Hers, like many intentionalist models, is intended as an account not only of the circumstances under which we form collectivities but also of the realm of the *social*, in terms of the thoughts and beliefs of individuals. However, as Section 6 will bring out, entry rules and imputed membership are themselves social concepts. They would permit certain individuals to count as part of a social group precisely because they are recognised as such by those already in it. Accordingly, to introduce them at this stage in the argument, without their own analysis in terms of collective ideas, is to rely on the very idea that is being defined.¹⁶

4. Non-Intentionalism , Complex Cases and Human Interests

Faced with three difficult but intuitively central cases, I have rejected the broad intentionalist theses and am left with an NIT so pared down so as no longer to live up to its middle initial. That is, with the idea of a collectivity as a number of individuals mutually dependent for either the achievement of a consciously shared goal or purpose or the securing for each of some individual selfish goal or human interest, not all of whom can or not acknowledge that dependence. In other words, we have almost exactly the definition in Section 1: a set of

individuals mutually dependent for the achievement or satisfaction of some common or shared purpose, goal or fundamental interest whether or not they acknowledge it themselves.

This accommodates all three special cases as members of families (or tribes), as follows obviously from points made in Section 2. The baby is mutually dependent with his parents and siblings for the achievement of the goals of family life (broadly, living peacefully and happily together). Of course, the baby does not have goals: he cannot formulate them. Moreover, the conscious, practical pursuit of common ends will be done by the others. However, the dependence is mutual because not only is it part of *their* shared aims that the baby be included (and is healthy and contented), but this positive family atmosphere is in *his* interest. The same argument can be offered for the severely mentally handicapped family member. The rebel is also tied to his family in various ways. He inhabits the same house and they all, including him, benefit from a supportive family atmosphere. There are common *interests* in play, fundamental interests in a stable family life, which can only be met together. In the first variant, he acknowledges some of these as selfish interests whilst mistakenly denying the mutual dependence for their achievement; in the second, he denies them even as interests.

The incorporation of interests into the model is no ad hoc manoeuvre. Rather, it is essential to avoiding the difficulty of explaining *which* non-intentional individuals – babies, mentally-handicapped persons, or indeed rebels – can be considered members of a collectivity without leaving it entirely to the (often dubious) discretion of some intentional “core”. They are members, on this model, because of their actual mutual dependence through interests. By contrast, my cousins cannot arbitrarily set rules to include my sister and me, *or* my nephew, in their fan club. Not only do we not share their goal: we do not have an interest in admiring Edward Cullen (let alone one which could only be satisfied by cooperation with them).

In making this move, however, I have to acknowledge the limitations of the current paper. Any reference to “interests” prompts a call for further clarification and defence. What counts as the kind of interest on which collectivityhood can be based? To anticipate Section 8, interpreting this too broadly would make the model too inclusive. However, it is possible to distinguish between cases of mutual dependence for the guarantee of fundamentally important

interests and those where only trivial interests (say, in having access to a particular fashion store) are at stake. What is salient about the cases just considered – the family including any of the complex case individuals – is that the interests in question are fundamental human interests. To clarify, it is to these that the non-intentionalist model is restricted.

This, in turn, presents further challenges: a plausible account is required of human interests which not only picks some out as fundamental but also, as in the second teenage rebel example, goes beyond what even an individual capable of forming goals espouses as such. I claim neither to provide such a model nor that it would be uncontroversial to do so, and to this extent my arguments remain conditional. I would note, however, that there is a well-documented mismatch between the achievement of individual goals and preferences and a flourishing human life.¹⁷ Rival accounts of human interests, which are more objective without being unacceptably paternalistic, are philosophically available.

In particular, the idea can be borrowed from some versions of the capabilities approach that flourishing requires a genuine opportunity to exercise certain broadly defined functions: as Amartya Sen puts it, “the capabilities to choose a life *one has reason to value*”.¹⁸ Such core functions would include life, health, bodily integrity, practical reason and affiliation.¹⁹ If deprivation of a central capability undermines a person’s ability fully to flourish, then there are some fundamental human interests: interests in retaining those central capabilities, many of which (health, life, affiliation) the infant or the mentally handicapped individual could also enjoy, and which are not reducible to the goals or preferences of any individual.²⁰

5. The State as Collectivity

The non-intentionalist model can also accommodate the state as a collectivity. Some might query whether it needs, for philosophical consistency, to do so: the state could rather be viewed more narrowly as a set of institutions which regulate the lives of individuals and of groups. However, it must be admitted as advantageous if it can. Political philosophy tends to treat this as *the* central collectivity, or decision-making locus, and to anticipate a discussion

beyond the limits of this paper, it would be interesting and helpful if *political* obligations could be explained via more general consideration of the obligations of membership of certain types of collectivity.²¹ Indeed, it is precisely through such generalised discussion, rather than unquestioning allegiance to the idea that there is something special about the state, that the sphere might be broadened of those to whom such obligations are owed.

The problem for the intentionalist is that, quite apart from those individuals who *cannot* form a joint commitment, it is impossible to identify a genuinely shared goal or purpose espoused in (say) Spain by those capable of espousing it. A first suggestion would be that the common goals are the many things the Spanish want to achieve as a country, from winning the World Cup to defending themselves, if necessary, against enemy attack. However, various individuals within Spain will not uphold such goals. For example, those with Brazilian parents or grandparents might support a rival football team. This would not be a problem so long as there were *some* shared goals or purposes at the state level. After all, there are many collectivities within a state, including cultural subgroups, each with its own goals or purposes. The real difficulty, however, is that some individuals are not committed to even the most general ends, such as defending Spain against attack. Consider extremist Basque separatists who do not regard themselves as part of Spain at all and actively work against the national government.

The non-intentionalist can accommodate such individuals by reference to a common *interest*. Those within a state are mutually dependent through its institutional framework. No matter how little they care about one another, the central capabilities each needs to live a flourishing life can, under the circumstances, only be secured together.

This should not be taken as implying either of two implausible claims.²² The first is that *all* actions of state institutions, including all systems of redistributive taxation, actually make things better for everyone.²³ Rather, the point is that having been born into the same state, we are dependent on it, and so ultimately on each other, for the security of such fundamental interests as life, health, bodily integrity and the opportunity to engage in meaningful planning of our own life. Even if the separatist would see these permanently unsatisfied rather than

accept the authority of the Spanish state, they are nonetheless interests *of his* which depend for fulfilment on some level of cooperation with those with whom he happens to share that state.

That is not to say – the second implausible claim – that *any* means of resolving the conflict, long term, must be in the all-things-considered interest of each of those caught up in it: for example, that the continuance of the state as it is makes the separatist's life better overall. Given his conception of the good, this is implausible. But even if different solutions are more or less to the advantage of different individuals – even if the ultimate outcome is the separation into two states, and two collectivities – the current mutual dependence remains a fact: mutual dependence, among other things, through the need each has to find *some* workable solution.

Thus, the non-intentionalist model withstands the charge levelled at the intentionalists: their inability to accommodate non-intentional members of intuitively and practically central collectivities. The next section will argue that it is able to do so without circularity.

6. Social Groups, Aggregates and Collectivities

This section will outline the distinctions between social groups and collectivities in general, and between collectivities and aggregates. This is partly to explain how the non-intentionalist model avoids circularity but also to emphasise a broader point: as well as accounting better than the intentionalist for some central *social* groups, the model highlights a wider set of collectivities that neither political philosophers nor social scientists can afford to ignore.

An aggregate is a set of individuals sharing some property, for example having blond hair. A collectivity, by contrast, is made up of individuals who are actually mutually dependent in the sense their goals, purposes or fundamental interests can only be satisfied together. Some aggregates will also be collectivities, but only where possession of the shared property gives rise to (or follows from) some common goal, purpose or fundamental interest. Thus blind people in the UK might constitute a collectivity because the structural provisions necessary for each to live as full a life as possible will be achievable only for all of them, and cannot be

secured by any in isolation. This does not apply, however, to those with blond hair.

With regard to social properties, without space or necessity to enumerate the many available philosophical accounts, I will simply draw on clear cut cases of their being true of someone or something – David Cameron is the British Prime Minister; England won the Ashes; a piece of plastic in my bag is a university staff card – to draft a necessary criterion so general as to be uncontroversial.²⁴

It is a necessary condition of a property's being a social property that it has significance over and above the material or physical properties with which it coincides, and has this because of the recognition by a certain group of individuals that it will have it.

I am trying to capture the idea of a general understanding that doing such-and-such a thing will *count as* doing *x*.²⁵

With this framework, the distinction can be brought out between social groups, social aggregates and non-social collectivities. The “significance” highlighted above is integral to some collectivities, and these collectivities are also social groups. This can arise in two ways, because of the two interpretations of “common” end, in Section 1. The first, on which intentionalists focus, involves a genuinely shared goal, as with the friends climbing Monte Rosa. In such cases, there is an additional significance to the goal's being achieved by them together, over and above its being achieved for each of them, precisely because those individuals count this as a particular kind of achievement. It is important to each that they *all* reach the summit and that they support each other in various ways to do so.

In the second case, action has to be taken by a number of individuals to secure some individual interest, purpose or goal each has, even if each individual is indifferent as to whether the others achieve their ends. Then, there *might* be a social component to the constitution of the collectivity: it might be because of social properties true of each of the individuals (say, their being members of the same social class) that they are mutually

dependent in this way. Alternatively, the goals requiring common achievement might involve a social property becoming true of some individual, group or material object. For example, individuals from different communities across a city might need to cooperate to promote the election of an official whom all wish to see in power.

Building on this discussion, social groups can be identified as follows.

A set of individuals constitute a social group if and only if they constitute a collectivity and: either, it is because of at least one social property true of the individuals that they are mutual dependent for the achievement or satisfaction of the common goal, purpose or fundamental interest, or it is an integral part of that common goal, purpose or fundamental interest that at least one social property becomes or remains true of someone, some set of individuals, or some thing.

Not all sets of individuals who share some social property count as social groups, because they do not all count as collectivities. As with sharing physical properties, there is no reason why this should render a set of individuals a collectivity unless that property ties its holders in some further way. For example, it is probable that there are many individuals across the world with the social property of being entitled to a Spanish passport (for example by virtue of a parent who emigrated at an early age) but consider themselves, and are, in no way specially tied to Spain. They are unconcerned about its World Cup performance and upset by terrorist attacks on Madrid no more than by such attacks anywhere else. Nor, because they have never actually lived in Spain, are they mutually dependent through fundamental interests. Like those with blond hair, this set of the nominally “Spanish” constitutes only an aggregate – in this case a social aggregate – and not a collectivity.

Moreover, not all collectivities are social groups: the *Lost* collectivity from Section 1 is not; nor are Sheehy’s prisoners. Further examples will follow in Section 7. In such cases the mutual dependence neither results from social factors nor adheres to a common end which is

irreducibly social. Political philosophers and social scientists should not limit their attention to the narrower set. Rather, as I will argue, identifying collectivities – all collectivities – rather than mere aggregates allows us to express new truths about certain situations in which individuals actually find themselves: sets of relations within which individual acts have a peculiarly collective significance and within which there is at least a prudential case for developing a framework for collective action.

This theoretical apparatus allows the non-intentionalist to accommodate the state, as a collectivity *and* a social group, without circularity. Intentionalists aim to define collectivities, taken to be the same thing as social groups, in terms of the beliefs of individuals. As we saw in Section 3, they must then risk circularity in introducing social concepts, such as entry rules, to accommodate non-intentional members. On the non-intentionalist model, there is no such problem because the definition is of a *collectivity*, which is not a social concept and is objectively defined. Because the mutual dependence between individuals within the state arises as a result of historical social arrangements, they constitute a social group as well as a collectivity. But, regardless of the status of (say) “being Spanish” as a social property, a person born in Spain finds herself, *as a matter of fact*, in relations of mutual dependence through fundamental interests with all those with whom she actually shares her country. That is, she is a member of that collectivity. Thus, the account avoids circularity.

7. Controversial Collectivities

As well as accommodating intuitively central collectivities better than the intentionalist, the non-intentionalist model allows for collectivities within which *no* members consider themselves part of a group, jointly intend to do anything, or acknowledge common goals or purposes.²⁶ This section defends this, arguing that even such controversial non-intentionalist collectivities meet three conditions against which candidates for collectivityhood might reasonably be judged.²⁷ The first is that the significance of certain individual actions cannot be

captured without reference to the collectivity as a whole. The second is that what the collectivity does is distinct from what the individuals do. The third is that lasting (as opposed to ad hoc) collectivities persist even as individual members leave and are replaced. I will consider these in turn and then expand with reference to three controversial examples.

The first condition has two elements: “significance” and “ineliminability”. There is an additional significance to certain individual acts in any non-intentionalist collectivity, not necessarily in the social sense of significance *assigned* by some group but because they contribute to a wider effect which, because of the relations in which the individuals stand, has a specific kind of impact on precisely those individuals. The relevant relations are those that render the set of individuals a collectivity. They are mutually dependent for the achievement of certain purposes, goals or fundamental interests: those ends, “common” in either of the two senses identified in Section 1, can only be achieved, *for each individual*, by the set as a whole.

This significance is “ineliminable” in that reference to collectivities enables us to state truths we would otherwise be unable to express: the collectivity has *expressive* or descriptive autonomy.²⁸ To parallel an argument once offered by Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit, some statements of fact, such as “the collectivity has lost three members” or “the losing team regrouped”, cannot be expressed by reference only to individuals. That is not to say that collective-level changes can occur without any individual level change (this would be to deny supervenience); rather, there is an open-ended list of possible combinations of individual changes, each of which could have brought about the collective change. It is impossible to identify even a lengthy disjunction of individual predicates for any one collective predicate.²⁹ (This is known as the multiple realisations argument.)

Regarding the second condition, two situations can be identified: those where it is impossible (by definition) for individuals to do what the collectivity does and those where individuals are merely physically unable to do so. Only the US electorate could *elect* Barack Obama president; individuals could only *vote* for him. A crew sails a large ship: something an individual sailor could not physically achieve.³⁰ In all cases, however, collectivities “do” or achieve something distinct from what their individual members do.

At first glance, the final condition faces difficulties when it comes to small collectivities. For example, the removal of one person from a couple seems to put an end to that collectivity. Would a collectivity composed of three friends survive if one left? However, these concerns can be rejected as obstacles to the non-intentionalist account. With the couple example, one person alone cannot generally be a collectivity. Moreover, some very small groups can sustain some changeover. A family is still a family when an extra child is born or one parent dies. A small friendship group could sometimes persist if one member was replaced (compare the turnover within a three-member pop band such as the Sugababes). We can accommodate this by allowing for borderline cases.³¹ Note also that the cases discussed here are *intentionalist* collectivities: if this is a problem, it is also a problem for the intentionalist.

To reinforce these points, we can apply the three conditions to three controversial examples. The first is the owners of second homes set round a village green. By picking a commuter village, with no history of community feeling, we can assume that the owners do not consider themselves part of a group. Each wants the green to be pleasant but only because this meets his individual requirements. To make it more strongly non-intentional, assume that, due to other commitments, each owner uses his second home on different days each fortnight. None even knows whether any of the others uses the green. However, because they all do, they can only keep it so by de facto cooperation. Each one (say, by dropping litter) could undermine the project. Thus, they count as a non-intentional collectivity.

Indefinitely many different combinations of individual action could secure the common end. Some individuals might pick up litter while others only refrain from spreading it, or vice versa; one person might put out food to encourage birdlife, another refrain from wearing his spiked boots to play football, or vice versa. It is true that each individual acts in this way because he wants to keep the green pleasant *for himself* but, because of their actual if unacknowledged relations, their acts only lead to the satisfaction of the goals in combination. The significance of their behaviour can only fully be captured once it is seen in this context, i.e. by reference to the collectivity. To put it another way (and satisfy the second condition), it

is this identifiable *collectivity*, rather than individuals in isolation, which keeps the green pleasant and tidy. The third condition is satisfied because individual houses could be sold and, assuming the new owners also want a pleasant green, the collectivity would persist.

Secondly, suppose four young men, members of deeply opposed gangs in their home city, are cast up on an island. In this *Lost-The Wire* hybrid, cooperation to find food, build shelter, and so on, is needed for each to survive. However, such is their mutual loathing that they deny any such idea and would rather spend their time on the island attempting to kill each other. They constitute an involuntary, unintentional collectivity.

There is a significance to each individual's action – a significance for him and precisely those others – which can only be brought out by reference to his being in a collectivity. In fighting the others, each is contributing to a situation in which his own interests are undermined. Moreover, the outcome (disaster or cooperation) could come about in innumerable ways. Whether x strikes y and z retaliates, or y attacks z and w runs off with the food, or another combination, the collective-level outcome is the same: tragedy. This is not a coincidental aggregation of individual acts, but the result of the combined acts of individuals – who are, but needn't have been, those particular individuals – within certain sets of relations. Thus, it is not each individual or simply the individuals in aggregate, but the collectivity *constituted by individuals in those particular relations*, that brings about this catastrophe. Finally, y and z could build a raft and leave, and members of rival gangs be washed ashore, without threatening the persistence of the collectivity.

The third example, borrowed from Graham, is the most controversial.

A pack of hyenas can coordinate in very subtle ways in collectively stalking and killing a lion. Though it may be presumed that they have intentions in doing so, they do not have the linguistic apparatus necessary for being aware of the intentions they have, and so *a fortiori* they are not aware of any such intentions being collective ones.³²

Indefinitely many different combinations of individual actions can lead to the group result:

one hyena might grab the lion and three others stop it from escaping, or the other way around, or some entirely different combination. In none of these scenarios does an individual hyena achieve the goal (kill the lion) except as one of a number of coordinating actors. In this sense, the significance of each act is only captured by ineliminable reference to the collectivity, which can also be said to have hunted the lion. Finally, individual hyenas could drop out and others join the hunt without affecting the survival of the collectivity. Thus, the non-intentionalist model can be extended to include nonhumans.

This concludes the second element of the defence of the non-intentionalist model. One final point is worth stressing. Some collectivities – those such as Sheehy’s prisoners that I have dubbed *ad hoc* – will not satisfy the third condition. However, lasting collectivities will; it is these that are of particular interest to practical philosophers and social scientists.

8. Objections

This section will reject two obvious, if conflicting, objections to the non-intentionalist model: that its conditions for collectivityhood are too weak, and that they are too strong. I will begin with the latter, according to which it is unnecessary to require mutual dependence of *all* members on *all* other members. Consider the state. Surely, the objector points out, everyone in the state can get along very well without everyone paying taxes, so long as enough people do so to support the health, security and education institutions?

The response to this is twofold, corresponding to two distinct scenarios. On the first, I have already noted the possibility of passive collectivities, or collectivities of which only a subset is active. Section 1 referred to Fathers For Justice, a subset of those divorced or separated fathers who would like to see changes to the law. Another example is those suffragettes seeking suffrage for all women as an active subset of the largely passive collectivity of women. In such cases, the goal, by its nature, would be achieved for all if achieved for any. This could be because it is a genuinely shared goal (for example, if all women genuinely espoused the goal that *all* women should have the vote) or simply because of the nature of the end sought (votes

for all women means votes for you if you are a woman, and it is in each woman's interest to have a vote). The mutual dependence clause is met because each individual's achieving her goal (or fundamental interest) depends on the others achieving theirs, and this is true even if the positive *effort* is put in by only the active subset.

The second scenario concerns goals or interests which do not by their nature need to be achieved by all for all, but do under the circumstances. Then, membership of the collectivity is contingent *both* on individuals having the fundamental interest, goal or purpose and on cooperation being required for its achievement. The state falls into this category. However, the objection can be rejected as narrowing down unnecessarily the ways in which an individual could cooperate. Omissions, as well as actions, can count. Thus, in the state, not everyone has to pay taxes for a peaceful, secure environment to be provided for all. However, satisfaction of common interests does require everyone to refrain from bombing government buildings or public places, poisoning the drinking water, and so on. Given modern technology, even one individual could cause general devastation.

This leaves the converse objection: that including as a collectivity any set of individuals who would benefit from cooperating, in terms of an interest or goal each has, renders the model implausibly weak. For example, you and I would both benefit from being fitter and running together would help us to do so. But to consider us a collectivity with the common end of running together would be counterintuitive if we have no wish or intention actually to do so.

This objection misrepresents the model, in that it glosses over a distinction between mutual *dependence* and the weaker condition of potential mutual advantage. According to the understanding of mutual dependence incorporated in the non-intentionalist account, a set of individuals do not constitute a collectivity unless they are in one of the following three situations. The first is that the individuals have an acknowledged shared goal in the simplest sense of wanting to achieve some particular end *together*, as with the friends on Monte Rosa.

Secondly, a set of individuals could constitute a collectivity without an acknowledged shared goal, if cooperation is *required* for the achievement of each one's individual goals or purposes. Suppose several climbers have, independently, got half way up Monte Rosa. The

weather has turned and each wants to get down, but this would require them to rope together and use all the equipment they have between them. Because of the situation, they constitute a collectivity even if none cares about getting down *together*. This can be distinguished from the case in which each could get down alone but it might be pleasanter (or faster) to combine forces. Then, there would be potential for mutual advantage but, unless all choose to adopt the new shared goal (getting down together), they would not constitute a collectivity.

The third possibility is that cooperation is required to satisfy each individual's fundamental interest. Recalling Section 4, this is not the same as hinging collectivityhood on each having *an* interest in something that would require cooperation for its satisfaction. Robert Nozick might have an interest in a public address system, the achievement of which would require cooperation with his neighbours, but this is not enough to render him and them a collectivity.³³ The interest is a trivial one, overridden by other goals and interests. However, the point borrowed from the capabilities approach was that there are some things of fundamental importance to any human life (such as a secure opportunity for health or bodily integrity), no matter what that individual's preferences are. Only if there is mutual dependence for the satisfaction of such a fundamental interest can a collectivity can be constituted where there is neither a genuinely common goal nor mutual dependence for the achievement of acknowledged individual goals.

Suppose not all the climbers want to retreat: some want to go on up to the summit despite the changed conditions. Then, they constitute a collectivity only if: a) their lives or other fundamental interests are at stake if they don't retreat, *and* b) the situation is as described above, so that none has the equipment or expertise to get down alone, but all could do so if they cooperated. If the risk of completing the ascent were only slightly increased, or if some could descend independently, they would not be mutually dependent in the required way.

This concludes the arguments of this paper. In defending the non-intentionalist model, I have accommodated central collectivities for which the intentionalist cannot adequately account. However, I have gone further than this. I have indicated the range of situations – many more

than we acknowledge – in which we are bound together into collectivities by our goals, purposes or fundamental interests and in which, like it or not, there is an ineliminable collective significance to what we do.

There are at least two ways in which this is only a first step. Firstly, the non-intentionalist model could have important implications for moral and political obligations. In identifying as collectivities situations where we are mutual dependent for what would make each of us better off, it yields at least a *prima facie* prudential case for collective decision-making: for *forming* joint commitments, where they do not already exist, which then assign individual duties.

Going further still, members of some collectivities might plausibly be said to *owe* each other such cooperation to achieve the common end. This might be defended by appeal to the fact that collective effort is required for the satisfaction, for each, of a fundamental human interest. It is relatively uncontroversial that we have a moral duty to cooperate to preserve others from great harm if we can do so at slight cost to each of us. The sacrifice of such an interest would constitute great harm, while precisely the *mutual* nature of the dependence would render that cost sufficiently low – indeed, each asked to cooperate to secure the interest should be *better off* doing so – so long as duties were fairly allocated to take into account other fundamental interests and moral ties. This, however, is the merest sketch of a highly complex question, to which I am attempting to do greater justice in work in progress elsewhere.

Secondly, social scientists seeking to interpret and assess our increasingly interconnected lives, and philosophers trying to make sense of our duties in a fragile world, might apply the model to defend a “collectivity of humanity”. Our common interests in such a case would include environmental preservation and the avoidance of other threats of humans to humanity, such as nuclear war or global economic meltdown. Again, elaboration and defence of these points lies beyond the scope of this paper, but in highlighting them I hope to have given some idea of the wider debate to which it could contribute.

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Notes

¹ Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (London: Routledge, 1989), 232-34, Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 54, 85-85.

² Paul Sheehy, "On Plural Subject Theory," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2002).

³ In making this distinction, I break not only with leading intentionalists but also with non-intentionalists Sheehy and Graham. (Ibid, Paul Sheehy, *The Reality of Social Groups* (Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), Keith Graham, *Practical Reasoning in a Social World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).) Intentionalist Tuomela distinguishes between collective and social actions but on a much weaker reading of "collective" than that identified here. (Raimo Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Social Practices: A Collective Acceptance View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82-83.)

⁴ Carol C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 104-13, Carol C. Gould, "Group Rights and Social Ontology," in *Groups and Group Rights*, ed. Christine Sistare, Larry May, and Leslie Francis (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 44-45, Alan Carter, "On Individualism, Collectivism and Interrelationism," *The Heythrop Journal* 31, no. 1 (1990).

⁵ I do not, for example, support Sheehy's view that groups are material composite objects (Sheehy, *Reality of Social Groups*, 97-130.).

⁶ Gilbert, *Social Facts*, 93-214, Gilbert, *Political Obligation*, 93-184, Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge

University Press, 2000), 66-112. Other intentionalists include Tuomela, *Philosophy of Social Practices*, esp. 131, Peter Caws, "The Distributive Structure of the Social Group," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2005). For Gould's account, see: Gould, *Rethinking Democracy*, 71-80, 109-13, Gould, "Group Rights," 44-55. Note however that, while her earlier monograph is explicitly intentionalist (Gould, *Rethinking Democracy*, 99.), she later hints at a view closer to that of this paper, describing her framework as one which defines group by joint activity or common purposes, "*whether explicitly recognised or not*" (Gould, "Group Rights," 45.).

⁷ In her terminology, collectivities (*plural subjects*) are constituted by sets of individuals "jointly committed to doing something as a body – in a broad sense of 'do'" with multi-level common knowledge of this commitment. (Gilbert, *Political Obligation*, 144-45.)

⁸ See ———, *Social Facts*, 198, Gilbert, *Political Obligation*, 75-82, 228-29, 35, Kutz, *Complicity*, 96-103, Gould, *Rethinking Democracy*, 108.

⁹ Thanks to David-Hillel Ruben for the example

¹⁰ Gilbert, *Political Obligation*, 233.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹² "Actis Formalis Defectionis Ab Ecclesia Catholic," (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, 2006). Thanks to Cecile Fabre for the example.

¹³ In fact, Gilbert's entry rules might be read as including a similar distinction: elsewhere in the same monograph, she states that infants are not full members of social groups. (———, *Social Facts*, 131-32.) However, this possibility is muddled by the fact that entry rules also apply to those who intend to espouse a group's goals without knowing in exact detail what they are. These, being rational adults, can presumably have full membership. (*Ibid.*, 233.)

¹⁴ An anonymous reviewer has argued that it could be advantageous for a model to incorporate degrees of membership, as it would capture something important about the nature of groups. However, the non-intentionalist can capture distinctions between members through the notion of different subsets (for example, the mentally handicapped family member would not be part

of the active subset consciously pursuing the common ends) without suggesting that some individuals are members of the overall collectivity only in a secondary sense.

¹⁵ Cecil Roth, "Forced Baptisms in Italy: A Contribution to the History of Jewish Persecution," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 27, no. 2 (1936).

¹⁶ This challenge is distinct from a more general accusation of circularity: that collective action cannot be explained as individuals having intentions of the form "I intend that we *x*", because "we *x*" itself refers to collective action. (Sheehy, "Plural Subject," 386-89, Bjorn Petersson, "Collectivity and Circularity," *Journal of Philosophy* 104, no. 3 (2007).)

¹⁷ I refer in particular to the problem of adaptive preferences: Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 109-40, John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women," in *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 484-87, Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111-66, Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 45-47.

¹⁸ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (New York & Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 74. [Emphasis added] See especially earlier articulations of Nussbaum's position: Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1990), Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992).

¹⁹ Nussbaum lists ten central capabilities: Life; Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination and Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; Control over one's Environment. However, this paper need not accept her more controversial inclusions. (Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 78-80.)

²⁰ The non-intentionalist model would remain of interest, although significantly curtailed in application, if it were impossible to offer an account of the interests of fully functioning adult

humans that did not reduce to their goals. Mutual dependence through externally defined interests could account for the membership of those incapable of forming goals, but no-one capable of doing so could become a member of a collectivity on the basis of an interest which they did not admit to having. The second teenage rebel could not be included in the family; nor, anticipating the next section, could some separatists be included in states.

²¹ Gilbert attempts to ground political obligation in her plural subject theory. (Gilbert, *Political Obligation*.)

²² I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for pushing me on these points.

²³ That is not necessarily to exclude the possibility of justifying redistributive taxation as part of a fair division of costs and burdens in pursuit of the more fundamental interests which are held in common.

²⁴ For example: Sheehy, *Reality of Social Groups*, 34, David-Hillel Ruben, *The Metaphysics of the Social World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 105-19.

²⁵ For a more detailed examination of this idea, see John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 1-29.

²⁶ Although this lies beyond the scope of this paper, the model might also accommodate entirely non-intentional social groups. Graham suggests an unintentional clique (Graham, *Practical Reasoning*, 72-73.). Cudd also points in this direction. (Ann E. Cudd, "Nonvoluntary Social Groups," in *Groups and Group Rights*, ed. Christine Sistare, Larry May, and Leslie Francis (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 63-64.)

²⁷ These, which I take to be generally plausible, are adapted from Graham's sufficient conditions for constitution of a collectivity (Graham, *Practical Reasoning*, 68-69.). However, he believes himself also to be offering an account of the social group.

²⁸ This definition is taken from Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 115. Graham also specifies his condition in terms of descriptive autonomy (Graham, *Practical Reasoning*, 83.). Unlike, say, Sheehy, I do not defend the *explanatory* autonomy of collectivities. (Paul Sheehy, "Social Groups,

Explanation and Ontological Holism," *Philosophical Papers* 32 (2003), Sheehy, *Reality of Social Groups*, 74-92.)

²⁹ Macdonald and Pettit, who defend the expressive autonomy of institutions, discuss this argument in much more detail (Macdonald and Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science*, 119.).

³⁰ Graham appears to exclude such combinations by distinguishing between *coordinated* human action and what he calls collective action, which involves a corporate entity (Graham, *Practical Reasoning*, 67.). This is problematic. He acknowledges the *significance* of acts contributing to coordinated rather than necessarily *social* action, so he must rely on the elaboration of his second condition to defend the distinction between coordination and collective action. However, presumably because he starts from the idea that social groups and collectivities are synonyms, he seems simply to assume that the only relevant cases are those involving social properties. This begs the question.

³¹ Note also that these are borderline only in the same way as we can cite borderline cases with regard to artefacts. How many legs does one remove from a chair before it ceases to be a chair? For a parallel discussion, see Sheehy, *Reality of Social Groups*, 122.

³² Graham, *Practical Reasoning*, 71-72. He borrows the example from Searle, *Social Reality*, 38. Sheehy extends his non-intentionalist model to include examples such as wolf packs. (Sheehy, *Reality of Social Groups*, 129-30.)

³³ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 93-95.